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ABSTRACT

This report describes the efforts of Babson College (Massachusetts) to change its traditional undergraduate business curriculum by designing a coherent program of greater rigor and flexibility that stresses interdisciplinary collaboration, supports individual learning needs, and links theory with field-based learning. In less than 3 years, Babson conceived, ratified, and implemented a radically different undergraduate program; the speed of implementation was in part a result of Babson's prior move to use separate, decentralized decision-making bodies for the undergraduate program, the graduate program, and for faculty appointment and tenure decisions. The comprehensive, competency-based program stresses learning-by-doing, gives students greater control over and responsibility for their educations, and contains three development levels: the first-year Foundation Program, which includes self-reflective work, integrated humanities and quantitative courses, and hands-on experience developing and running a business; the third through fifth semester Intermediate Program, which includes integrated liberal arts courses and a core management program; and in the remaining three semesters, the Advanced Program, in which students follow a curriculum and co-curricular program developed with the assistance of mentors during the intermediate program. Institutional statistics and a list of milestones on Babson's path to reform are included. (MAB)

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PERSPECTIVES
June 1998

# Exemplars Exemplars

ED 422 776

## Babson College

**The Problem:** ***A traditional, disciplinary, lock-step undergraduate curriculum was under-preparing graduates for the changing business environment of a global economy.***

**The Solution:** ***Design a coherent program that includes greater rigor and flexibility, stresses interdisciplinary collaboration, better supports individual learning needs, and more explicitly links theory with field-based learning.***

For years, Babson College took pride in the knowledge that—by all traditional measures—it was the best business college of its kind; indeed, *U.S. News and World Report* agreed with this assessment, ranking Babson as the nation's number-one specialty school for eight years running. But, in pressing beyond this measure to ask in all candor, "How are we doing?" the College received an answer that not only changed its self-perception but also completely redirected the focus of its undergraduate education.

Not an institution willing to rest on its laurels, Babson changed before it had to. The College surveyed its constituents and convened a three-day retreat in August of 1993 with its stakeholders—alumni, employers, and students—to discuss the relevance of the existing undergraduate curriculum. Babson faculty had just integrated the core of the MBA curriculum, breaking down the disciplinary boundaries that had traditionally defined student coursework, and the College's leadership suspected that the undergraduate program might benefit from a similar redesign. Their suspicions were highlighted in the survey results and confirmed at the retreat: former and current students criticized the business school's menu

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of courses, citing a rigid structure, a disconnection with the real world of work, and a tendency to teach skills in isolation. Faculty expressed disappointment with students' lack of engagement in their studies. What came as more of a surprise, however, were employers' lukewarm reviews of the performance of Babson graduates.

Emerging from the retreat, Babson quickly realized that its undergraduate curriculum needed to become more rigorous, flexible, and able to instill in students a greater responsibility for their own intellectual and interpersonal growth. The solution was to reinvent the College's approach to undergraduate business education, using the disciplinary integration of the MBA program as a model. Rather than simply restructure course requirements, the faculty moved to create a new learning *environment* at Babson—one that is rich in practical and field experiences, integrates the disciplines, and supports individual learning needs. "We wanted to shift to an interdisciplinary focus," says Stephen Schiffman, dean of the undergraduate program, "because in today's business world, you're not an accountant on Monday, an organizational behaviorist on Tuesday, and a manager on Wednesday. You are all things at all times."

Moving quite literally at the speed of business, in just under three years Babson conceived, ratified, and implemented a radically different undergraduate program. "Four things made this swift but purposeful change possible: the integration of the disciplines in the MBA program; the fact that our relatively small faculty teaches both graduate and undergraduate students; the strategic funds put in place in 1989 to promote curriculum reform; and a change in governance in the early 1990s."

Prior to the advent of reform, Babson had already recast and streamlined its governance process by forming three elected Decision-Making Bodies (DMBs)—one for the undergraduate program, one for the graduate program, and one for faculty appointment and tenure decisions. Small and nimble, each DMB is composed of five elected faculty members. "If elected, faculty know they are going to wear a 'college hat,' not a departmental one," says Schiffman, who sees the structure of the DMBs as essential to their effectiveness. The faculty, writ large, has entrusted decision-making powers to these small groups, empowering them to initiate, focus, nurture, guide, and *approve* programmatic changes. Collegiality has not been sacrificed for the sake of efficiency; individual faculty members who dispute the action of a DMB can write a white paper to alert the college community and call for a full faculty vote. In the seven years since the

College shifted to this form of academic decision making, only one such paper has been produced.

The move to a decentralized decision-making process steered by DMBs eliminated bureaucracy and fostered flexibility, serving as the key factor in achieving consensus on the direction of change—which manifested as near-unanimous approval in a full faculty vote for the philosophy, structure, and features of the new curriculum. "Senior leadership also contributed to widespread faculty effort and energy," according to Nan Langowitz, professor of management, "by sending signals indicating that if we had ideas, we had the support of the administration to try them as well as the resources necessary to develop them."

Babson's Undergraduate DMB arrived at a comprehensive, competency-based program that contains three developmental levels, stresses learning-by-doing, and gives students greater control over—and responsibility for—their education. "The motivation for the competencies and three-tiered approach," says Schiffman, "is that if we were going to give students more freedom in their choice of courses, then we had to structure the educational experience to prepare them for making wise and well-planned decisions."

Through several innovative curricular and assessment mechanisms at all three developmental levels (Foundation, Intermediate, and Advanced), students visit and revisit 27 core competencies with increasing depth and breadth throughout their careers. Michael Maka, a student now in his second year, explains: "The competencies are well-defined and integrated in the curriculum, and it makes a difference in the education we're receiving. Here, we approach content *through* the competencies, and I feel like I'm better prepared for what's coming next—in terms of the next level at Babson and my life after college."

The competencies are introduced at the Foundation level during students' first year, through the two-semester, one-credit "First-Year Experience and Portfolio Self-Reflection" course. A faculty advisor/mentor works with a group of 15 students, called a "Small Learning Team," helping students to understand the competencies and to write a self-reflective essay describing their approach to mastering them. Adam Berger, a first-year student, often relates what he learns inside and outside of the classroom to the competencies, even though they are not explicitly "engaged" in every class session. "They're not like a building that you see every day; they're more like the foundation. You know they are there, you know that

they are structuring the shape of your education, and you know how they're doing it."

Other components of the Foundation Program include integrated humanities and quantitative courses as well as the Foundation Management Experience (FME), a hands-on, year-long required course in which students develop and run an actual business. The FME is funded by loans from the College, but students donate their proceeds and time to a charity. Adam, who is serving as the CEO of his class's Kash 4 Kids Discount Card business, clearly sees the relationship between the FME, the competencies, and the applied learning stressed in Babson's new curriculum: "I now understand how the success of a manager is determined by the quality of your communication skills—that you need to know how to motivate people. I've also learned about the other side: the problems that occur when someone drops the ball and how creative you must be to deal with a situation that has real constraints. What you learn through this hands-on experience is intangible—it's not a grade, but a series of lessons you know you can build on in the future."

During the second semester of the Foundation level, students reflect on their performance through the Babson External Assessment Program (BEAP), where they receive feedback on the development of competencies from volunteer members of the local business community, alumni, and MBA students. The assessors are trained by faculty to gauge students' oral communication, leadership, listening, teamwork, and decision-making skills through structured and videotaped conversations. "It's a matter of pride for us that, of the 340 students involved in the first BEAP program, all but eight showed up for their assessments at 8:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning," says Schiffman.

The Intermediate Program—undertaken during students' third through fifth semesters—includes integrated liberal arts courses and the Intermediate Management Core (IMC), which teaches core management courses in a profoundly different way than traditional business school curricula. Babson designed the IMC to address the *process* of management, developing students' competencies to become broad-based entrepreneurial problem-solvers. The three-semester sequence of courses focuses on critical thinking—teaching students how to analyze and approach a complex and ambiguous problem, identify salient information to address the problem, apply appropriate analytical tools, settle on a course of action, and create a plan to implement the solution.

Nan Langowitz, who directs the Intermediate Management Core, describes the curriculum's uniquely integrated and interdisciplinary design: "The faculty group that developed these courses was from a range of disciplines, and the framework of the core actually came from Rhetoric. We took as our organizing principle the three steps of description/analysis/synthesis and applied them across the functions of management education. Each of the three courses builds on each other, the first provides the basic tools and descriptive skills, the second provides the analytic tools, and the third focuses on implementing decisions based on these tools."

In the Advanced Program, which occupies the remaining three semesters, students follow a curricular and co-curricular program that they developed along with their mentors during Intermediate studies. The "Learning Plan" is a self-directed course of study based on students' ultimate career goals and the further development of the core competencies. The Learning Plan is designed to be more than a major that is tailored to student interests; it stresses field-based study as well as coursework, and it challenges students to think purposefully about educational goals and processes.

At the same time it reinvented its curriculum and modes of assessment, Babson modified its tenure and promotion process to foster the intellectual vitality of its faculty, who are now rewarded for participation in applied research—including teaching reform and the development of new teaching materials—as well as for more traditional scholarship. Babson also instituted a new tool for division chairs, called "Guideprof," to help faculty set individual plans for teaching, intellectual vitality, and community service. Guideprof works by tracking faculty time and effort in research and service, as well as teaching hours.

While financial considerations did not spur Babson's move toward reform, the College did re-engineer nonacademic processes to provide better student services and generate savings that were reinvested in the academic core: 21 new faculty positions were created over three years through the reduction of administrative staff, the outsourcing of physical plant services, and the renegotiation of benefits contracts. Together, these measures have yielded over $1.3 million of new funds annually.

Babson's curriculum and the structures in place to support it are very young—and evolving. The first class to engage this dynamic program has only reached the Intermediate level, and Dean Schiffman admits that

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there are many areas which still require refinement. In addition, it is still too early to offer hard evidence of improvement. But if success has an anecdotal measure, it is well-represented by this story, told by Allan Cohen, vice president of academic affairs, about more recent levels of student engagement: "Under the old curriculum, there were constant complaints about the state of the Quad on every Friday afternoon in the spring; students were lounging in the sun, radios blaring, doing anything but coursework and attending classes. Now, you can walk across the Quad on a sunny day, and there isn't a peep. It looks as though the changes we made are having the desired effect: students are taking more direct responsibility for their own learning."

### Institutional Statistics:

Private business college in eastern Massachusetts
**1,627** undergraduate and **1,644** full- and part-time MBA students
**151** full-time faculty; **53** part-time faculty

### Milestones on the Path to Reform:

- Curriculum renewal began in the late 1980s, when faculty members started to rethink the MBA program, shifting from a disciplinary-based structure to an interdisciplinary focus. At the same time, some faculty who taught undergraduates began discussing the need to raise standards and the level of rigor expected of freshmen.

- A new College president arrived in 1989, initiated a strategic planning process in each of the degree programs, and set up a multi-year strategic funds budget to promote curricular reform initiatives.

- In 1990, the governance structure of the College was altered. Small, elected faculty Decision Making Bodies (DMBs) were formed to allow for faster, more flexible curriculum change.

- In the early 1990s, academic vice president Allan Cohen led the development of a new faculty workload planning tool, called "Guideprof."

- In August of 1993, Babson held a three-day retreat on the state of the undergraduate curriculum. There was agreement that the curriculum needed to be strengthened, especially in the areas of disciplinary inte-

gration and field-based learning, and that students should take more responsibility for their own learning.

- In 1993, the Undergraduate DMB began discussing a new curriculum based on competency and assessment models and charged the faculty with defining a set of competencies that all Babson undergraduates should develop.

- In the fall of 1993, the revised first year of the MBA program was launched. Separate, semester-long functional business courses were replaced by four fully integrated learning modules.

- A pilot course, integrating general management and computer information systems, was launched for freshmen in the fall of 1993. Through the Foundation Management Experience (FME), a class of 40 students planned and launched a business and community service project with funds loaned by the College.

- In January of 1995, the Undergraduate DMB ratified a set of 27 "Babson Student Core Competencies" and identified a set of five overarching "across-the-curriculum" competencies that played a key role in shaping the new curriculum.

- In November of 1995, after two years of development using faculty groups and open meetings, the Undergraduate DMB presented a proposal for the new curriculum to the faculty for ratification. The faculty almost unanimously approved the proposal in December of 1995.

- The new curriculum was launched for the class entering in the fall of 1996. New first-year courses were implemented, including integrated arts and humanities, history and society, and science foundation courses, as well as FME for all students.

- The academic advising process was changed to be consistent with the goals of the new curriculum. First- and second-year students began working with their faculty advisors to develop portfolios, write essays reflecting on their development of broad competencies, and draft individualized learning plans.

- During March of 1997, the Babson External Assessment Program (BEAP), developed by Babson organizational behavior faculty, was implemented for all first-year students.

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- The first semester of the new Intermediate Management Core (IMC) was launched for all second-year students in the fall of 1997. The IMC, a three-semester integrated sequence, was designed to replace the separate functional business courses that comprised the old management core.

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